

LANCELOT AND ELAINE.



ELAINE the fair, Elaine the lovable,
Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat,
High in her chamber up a tower to the east
Guarded the sacred shield of Lancelot;
Which first she placed where morning's earliest ray 5
Might strike it, and awake her with the gleam;
Then, fearing rust or soilure, fashion'd for it
A case of silk, and braided thereupon
All the devices blazon'd on the shield
In their own tinct, and added, of her wit, 10
A border fantasy of branch and flower,
And yellow-throated nestling in the nest.
Nor rested thus content, but day by day,
Leaving her household and good father, climb'd
That eastern tower, and entering barr'd her door, 15
Stript off the case, and read the naked shield,
Now guess'd a hidden meaning in his arms,
Now made a pretty history to herself
Of every dint a sword had beaten in it,
And every scratch a lance had made upon it, 20
Conjecturing when and where: this cut is fresh;
That ten years back; this dealt him at Caerlyle;
That at Caerleon; this at Camelot:
And ah, God's mercy, what a stroke was there!
And here a thrust that might have kill'd, but God 25
Broke the strong lance, and roll'd his enemy down,
And saved him: so she lived in fantasy.

How came the lily maid by that good shield
 Of Lancelot, she that knew not even his name?
 He left it with her, when he rode to tilt 30
 For the great diamond in the diamond jousts,
 Which Arthur had ordain'd, and by that name
 Had named them, since a diamond was the prize.

For Arthur, long before they crown'd him king,
 Roving the trackless realms of Lyonesse, 35
 Had found a glen, gray boulder and black tarn.
 A horror lived about the tarn, and clave
 Like its own mists to all the mountain side:
 For here two brothers, one a king, had met
 And fought together; but their names were lost; 40
 And each had slain his brother at a blow;
 And down they fell and made the glen abhorr'd:
 And there they lay till all their bones were bleach'd,
 And lichen'd into color with the crags:
 And he that once was king had on a crown 45
 Of diamonds, one in front and four aside.
 And Arthur came, and laboring up the pass,
 All in a misty moonshine, unawares
 Had trodden that crown'd skeleton, and the skull
 Brake from the nape, and from the skull the crown 50
 Roll'd into light, and turning on its rims
 Fled like a glittering rivulet to the tarn:
 And down the shingly scaur he plunged, and caught,
 And set it on his head, and in his heart
 Heard murmurs, "Lo, thou likewise shalt be king." 55

Thereafter, when a king, he had the gems
 Pluck'd from the crown, and show'd them to his knights,
 Saying: "These jewels, whereupon I chanced
 Divinely, are the kingdom's, not the King's —
 For public use: henceforward let there be, 60

Once every year, a joust for one of these:
 For so by nine years' proof we needs must learn
 Which is our mightiest, and ourselves shall grow
 In use of arms and manhood, till we drive
 The heathen, who, some say, shall rule the land 65
 Hereafter, which God hinder!" Thus he spoke:
 And eight years past, eight jousts had been, and still
 Had Lancelot won the diamond of the year,
 With purpose to present them to the Queen
 When all were won; but, meaning all at once 70
 To snare her royal fancy with a boon
 Worth half her realm, had never spoken word.

Now for the central diamond and the last
 And largest, Arthur, holding then his court
 Hard on the river nigh the place which now 75
 Is this world's hugest, let proclaim a joust
 At Camelot, and when the time drew nigh
 Spake — for she had been sick — to Guinevere:
 "Are you so sick, my Queen, you cannot move 79
 To these fair jousts?" "Yea, lord," she said, "ye know it."
 "Then will ye miss," he answer'd, "the great deeds
 Of Lancelot, and his prowess in the lists,
 A sight ye love to look on." And the Queen
 Lifted her eyes, and they dwelt languidly
 On Lancelot, where he stood beside the King. 85
 He, thinking that he read her meaning there,
 "Stay with me, I am sick; my love is more
 Than many diamonds," yielded; and a heart
 Love-loyal to the least wish of the Queen —
 However much he yearn'd to make complete 90
 The tale of diamonds for his destined boon —
 Urged him to speak against the truth, and say,
 "Sir King, mine ancient wound is hardly whole,
 And lets me from the saddle;" and the King

Glanced first at him, then her, and went his way. 95
No sooner gone than suddenly she began :

“To blame, my lord Sir Lancelot, much to blame!
Why go ye not to these fair jousts? the knights
Are half of them our enemies, and the crowd
Will murmur, ‘Lo the shameless ones, who take 100
Their pastime now the trustful King is gone!’”
Then Lancelot, vext at having lied in vain :
“Are ye so wise? ye were not once so wise,
My Queen, that summer when ye loved me first.
Then of the crowd ye took no more account 105
Than of the myriad cricket of the mead,
When its own voice clings to each blade of grass,
And every voice is nothing. As to knights,
Them surely can I silence with all ease.
But now my loyal worship is allow’d 110
Of all men : many a bard, without offence,
Has link’d our names together in his lay,
Lancelot, the flower of bravery, Guinevere,
The pearl of beauty ; and our knights at feast
Have pledged us in this union, while the King . 115
Would listen smiling. How then? is there more?
Has Arthur spoken aught? or would yourself,
Now weary of my service and devoir,
Henceforth be truer to your faultless lord?”

She broke into a little scornful laugh : 120
“Arthur, my lord, Arthur, the faultless King,
That passionate perfection, my good lord —
But who can gaze upon the sun in heaven?
He never spake word of reproach to me,
He never had a glimpse of mine untruth, 125
He cares not for me : only here to-day
There gleamed a vague suspicion in his eyes :

Some meddling rogue has tamper’d with him — else
Rapt in this fancy of his Table Round,
And swearing men to vows impossible, 130
To make them like himself ; but, friend, to me
He is all fault who hath no fault at all :
For who loves me must have a touch of earth ;
The low sun makes the color : I am yours,
Not Arthur’s, as ye know, save by the bond. 135
And therefore hear my words : go to the jousts :
The tiny-trumpeting gnat can break our dream
When sweetest ; and the vermin voices here
May buzz so loud — we scorn them, but they sting.”

Then answer’d Lancelot, the chief of knights : 140
“And with what face, after my pretext made,
Shall I appear, O Queen, at Camelot, I
Before a king who honors his own word
As if it were his God’s?”

“Yea,” said the Queen, 145
“A moral child without the craft to rule,
Else had he not lost me : but listen to me,
If I must find you wit : we hear it said
That men go down before your spear at a touch,
But knowing you are Lancelot ; your great name,
This conquers : hide it therefore ; go unknown : 150
Win ! by this kiss you will : and our true King
Will then allow your pretext, O my knight,
As all for glory : for to speak him true,
Ye know right well, how meek soe’er he seem,
No keener hunter after glory breathes. 155
He loves it in his knights more than himself ;
They prove to him his work : win and return.”

Then got Sir Lancelot suddenly to horse,
 Wroth at himself. Not willing to be known,
 He left the barren-beaten thoroughfare, 160
 Chose the green path that show'd the rarer foot,
 And there among the solitary downs,
 Full often lost in fancy, lost his way;
 Till as he traced a faintly-shadow'd track,
 That all in loops and links among the dales 165
 Ran to the Castle of Astolat, he saw
 Fired from the west, far on a hill, the towers.
 Thither he made, and blew the gateway horn.
 Then came an old, dumb, myriad-wrinkled man,
 Who let him into lodging and disarm'd. 170
 And Lancelot marvell'd at the wordless man;
 And issuing found the Lord of Astolat
 With two strong sons, Sir Torre and Sir Lavaine,
 Moving to meet him in the castle court;
 And close behind them stept the lily maid 175
 Elaine, his daughter: mother of the house
 There was not. Some light jest among them rose
 With laughter dying down as the great knight
 Approach'd them; then the Lord of Astolat:
 "Whence comest thou, my guest, and by what name 180
 Livest between the lips? for by thy state
 And presence I might guess thee chief of those,
 After the King, who eat in Arthur's halls.
 Him have I seen: the rest, his Table Round,
 Known as they are, to me they are unknown." 185

Then answer'd Lancelot, the chief of knights:
 "Known am I, and of Arthur's hall, and known,
 What I by mere mischance have brought, my shield.
 But since I go to joust as one unknown
 At Camelot for the diamond, ask me not; 190
 Hereafter ye shall know me — and the shield —

I pray you lend me one, if such you have,
 Blank, or at least with some device not mine."

Then said the Lord of Astolat: "Here is Torre's:
 Hurt in his first tilt was my son, Sir Torre; 195
 And so, God wot, his shield is blank enough.
 His ye can have." Then added plain Sir Torre,
 "Yea, since I cannot use it, ye may have it."
 Here laugh'd the father saying: "Fie, Sir Churl,
 Is that an answer for a noble knight? 200
 Allow him! but Lavaine, my younger here,
 He is so full of lustihood, he will ride,
 Joust for it, and win, and bring it in an hour,
 And set it in this damsel's golden hair,
 To make her twice as wilful as before." 205

"Nay, father, nay, good father, shame me not
 Before this noble knight," said young Lavaine,
 "For nothing. Surely I but play'd on Torre:
 He seem'd so sullen, vext he could not go:
 A jest, no more! for, knight, the maiden dreamt 210
 That some one put this diamond in her hand,
 And that it was too slippery to be held,
 And slipt and fell into some pool or stream,
 The castle-well, belike; and then I said
 That *if* I went and *if* I fought and won it — 215
 But all was jest and joke among ourselves —
 Then must she keep it safelier. All was jest.
 But, father, give me leave, and if he will,
 To ride to Camelot with this noble knight:
 Win shall I not, but do my best to win; 220
 Young as I am, yet would I do my best."

"So ye will grace me," answer'd Lancelot,
 Smiling a moment, "with your fellowship

O'er these waste downs whereon I lost myself,
 Then were I glad of you as guide and friend: 225
 And you shall win this diamond, — as I hear,
 It is a fair large diamond, — if ye may,
 And yield it to this maiden, if ye will.”
 “A fair large diamond,” added plain Sir Torre,
 “Such be for queens, and not for simple maids.” 230
 Then she, who held her eyes upon the ground,
 Elaine, and heard her name so tost about,
 Flush'd slightly at the slight disparagement
 Before the stranger knight, who, looking at her,
 Full courtly, yet not falsely, thus return'd: 235
 “If what is fair be but for what is fair,
 And only queens are to be counted so,
 Rash were my judgment then, who deem this maid
 Might wear as fair a jewel as is on earth,
 Not violating the bond of like to like.” 240

He spoke and ceased: the lily maid Elaine,
 Won by the mellow voice before she look'd,
 Lifted her eyes and read his lineaments.
 The great and guilty love he bare the Queen,
 In battle with the love he bare his lord, 245
 Had marr'd his face, and mark'd it ere his time.
 Another sinning on such heights with one,
 The flower of all the west and all the world,
 Had been the sleeker for it; but in him
 His mood was often like a fiend, and rose 250
 And drove him into wastes and solitudes
 For agony, who was yet a living soul.
 Marr'd as he was, he seem'd the goodliest man
 That ever among ladies ate in hall,
 And noblest, when she lifted up her eyes. 255
 However marr'd, of more than twice her years,
 Seam'd with an ancient sword-cut on the cheek,

And bruised and bronzed, she lifted up her eyes
 And loved him, with that love which was her doom.

Then the great knight, the darling of the court, 260
 Loved of the loveliest, into that rude hall
 Stept with all grace, and not with half disdain
 Hid under grace, as in a smaller time,
 But kindly man moving among his kind:
 Whom they with meats and vintage of their best 265
 And talk and minstrel melody entertain'd.
 And much they ask'd of court and Table Round,
 And ever well and readily answer'd he;
 But Lancelot, when they glanced at Guinevere,
 Suddenly speaking of the wordless man, 270
 Heard from the baron that, ten years before,
 The heathen caught and reft him of his tongue.
 “He learnt and warn'd me of their fierce design
 Against my house, and him they caught and maim'd;
 But I, my sons, and little daughter fled 275
 From bonds or death, and dwelt among the woods
 By the great river in a boatman's hut.
 Dull days were those, till our good Arthur broke
 The Pagan yet once more on Badon hill.”

“O there, great lord, doubtless,” Lavaine said, rapt 280
 By all the sweet and sudden passion of youth
 Toward greatness in its elder, “you have fought.
 O, tell us — for we live apart — you know
 Of Arthur's glorious wars.” And Lancelot spoke
 And answer'd him at full, as having been 285
 With Arthur in the fight which all day long
 Rang by the white mouth of the violent Glem;
 And in the four loud battles by the shore
 Of Duglas; that on Bassa; then the war
 That thunder'd in and out the gloomy skirts 290

Of Celidon the forest; and again
 By Castle Gurnion, where the glorious King
 Had on his cuirass worn our Lady's Head,
 Carved of one emerald centred in a sun
 Of silver rays, that lighten'd as he breathed; 295
 And at Caerleon had he helped his lord,
 When the strong neighings of the wild White Horse
 Set every gilded parapet shuddering;
 And up in Agned-Cathregonion too,
 And down the waste sand-shores of Trath Treroit, 300
 Where many a heathen fell; "and on the mount
 Of Badon I myself beheld the King
 Charge at the head of all his Table Round,
 And all his legions crying Christ and him,
 And break them; and I saw him, after, stand 305
 High on a heap of slain, from spur to plume
 Red as the rising sun with heathen blood,
 And seeing me, with a great voice he cried,
 'They are broken, they are broken!' for the King,
 However mild he seems at home, nor cares 310
 For triumph in our mimic wars, the jousts —
 For if his own knight casts him down, he laughs,
 Saying his knights are better men than he —
 Yet in this heathen war the fire of God
 Fills him: I never saw his like; there lives 315
 No greater leader."

While he utter'd this,
 Low to her own heart said the lily maid,
 "Save your great self, fair lord;" and when he fell
 From talk of war to traits of pleasantry —
 Being mirthful he, but in a stately kind — 320
 She still took note that when the living smile
 Died from his lips, across him came a cloud
 Of melancholy severe, from which again,

Whenever in her hovering to and fro
 The lily maid had striven to make him cheer, 325
 There brake a sudden-beaming tenderness
 Of manners and of nature: and she thought
 That all was nature, all, perchance, for her.
 And all night long his face before her lived,
 As when a painter, poring on a face, 330
 Divinely thro' all hindrance finds the man
 Behind it, and so paints him that his face,
 The shape and color of a mind and life,
 Lives for his children, ever at its best
 And fullest; so the face before her lived, 335
 Dark-splendid, speaking in the silence, full
 Of noble things, and held her from her sleep,
 Till rathe she rose, half-cheated in the thought
 She needs must bid farewell to sweet Lavaine.
 First as in fear, step after step, she stole 340
 Down the long tower-stairs, hesitating:
 Anon, she heard Sir Lancelot cry in the court,
 "This shield, my friend, where is it?" and Lavaine
 Past inward, as she came from out the tower.
 There to his proud horse Lancelot turn'd, and smooth'd 345
 The glossy shoulder, humming to himself.
 Half-envious of the flattering hand, she drew
 Nearer and stood. He look'd, and, more amazed
 Than if seven men had set upon him, saw
 The maiden standing in the dewy light. 350
 He had not dream'd she was so beautiful.
 Then came on him a sort of sacred fear,
 For silent, tho' he greeted her, she stood
 Rapt on his face as if it were a god's.
 Suddenly flash'd on her a wild desire 355
 That he should wear her favor at the tilt.
 She braved a riotous heart in asking for it.
 "Fair lord, whose name I know not — noble it is,

I well believe, the noblest — will you wear
 My favor at this tourney? "Nay," said he, 360
 "Fair lady, since I never yet have worn
 Favor of any lady in the lists.
 Such is my wont, as those who know me know."
 "Yea, so," she answer'd; "then in wearing mine
 Needs must be lesser likelihood, noble lord, 365
 That those who know should know you." And he turn'd
 Her counsel up and down within his mind,
 And found it true, and answer'd: "True, my child.
 Well, I will wear it: fetch it out to me:
 What is it?" and she told him, "A red sleeve 370
 Broider'd with pearls," and brought it: then he bound
 Her token on his helmet, with a smile
 Saying, "I never yet have done so much
 For any maiden living," and the blood
 Sprang to her face and fill'd her with delight; 375
 But left her all the paler when Lavaine
 Returning brought the yet-unblazon'd shield,
 His brother's; which he gave to Lancelot,
 Who parted with his own to fair Elaine:
 "Do me this grace, my child, to have my shield 380
 In keeping till I come." "A grace to me,"
 She answer'd, "twice to-day. I am your squire!"
 Whereat Lavaine said laughing: "Lily maid,
 For fear our people call you lily maid
 In earnest, let me bring your color back; 385
 Once, twice, and thrice: now get you hence to bed:"
 So kiss'd her, and Sir Lancelot his own hand,
 And thus they moved away: she staid a minute,
 Then made a sudden step to the gate, and there —
 Her bright hair blown about the serious face 390
 Yet rosy-kindled with her brother's kiss —
 Paused by the gateway, standing near the shield
 In silence, while she watch'd their arms far-off

Sparkle, until they dipt below the downs.
 Then to her tower she climb'd, and took the shield, 395
 There kept it, and so lived in fantasy.

Meanwhile the new companions past away
 Far o'er the long backs of the bushless downs,
 To where Sir Lancelot knew there lived a knight 400
 Not far from Camelot, now for forty years
 A hermit, who had pray'd, labor'd and pray'd,
 And ever laboring had scoop'd himself
 In the white rock a chapel and a hall
 On massive columns, like a shore-cliff cave,
 And cells and chambers: all were fair and dry; 405
 The green light from the meadows underneath
 Struck up and lived along the milky roofs;
 And in the meadows tremulous aspen-trees
 And poplars made a noise of falling showers.
 And thither wending there that night they bode. 410

But when the next day broke from underground,
 And shot red fire and shadows thro' the cave,
 They rose, heard mass, broke fast, and rode away.
 Then Lancelot saying, "Hear, but hold my name
 Hidden, you ride with Lancelot of the Lake," 415
 Abash'd Lavaine, whose instant reverence,
 Dearer to true young hearts than their own praise,
 But left him leave to stammer, "Is it indeed?"
 And after muttering, "The great Lancelot,"
 At last he got his breath and answer'd: "One, 420
 One have I seen — that other, our liege lord,
 The dread Pendragon, Britain's King of kings,
 Of whom the people talk mysteriously,
 He will be there — then were I stricken blind
 That minute, I might say that I had seen." 425

So spake Lavaine, and when they reach'd the lists
 By Camelot in the meadow, let his eyes
 Run thro' the peopled gallery which half round
 Lay like a rainbow fallen upon the grass,
 Until they found the clear-faced King, who sat 430
 Robed in red samite, easily to be known,
 Since to his crown the golden dragon clung.
 And down his robe the dragon writhed in gold,
 And from the carven-work behind him crept 435
 Two dragons gilded, sloping down to make
 Arms for his chair, while all the rest of them
 Thro' knots and loops and folds innumerable
 Fled ever thro' the woodwork, till they found
 The new design wherein they lost themselves,
 Yet with all ease, so tender was the work : 440
 And, in the costly canopy o'er him set,
 Blazed the last diamond of the nameless king.

Then Lancelot answer'd young Lavaine and said :
 " Me you call great : mine is the firmer seat,
 The truer lance : but there is many a youth 445
 Now crescent, who will come to all I am
 And overcome it ; and in me there dwells
 No greatness, save it be some far-off touch
 Of greatness to know well I am not great :
 There is the man." And Lavaine gaped upon him 450
 As on a thing miraculous, and anon
 The trumpets blew ; and then did either side,
 They that assail'd, and they that held the lists,
 Set lance in rest, strike spur, suddenly move,
 Meet in the midst, and there so furiously 455
 Shock that a man far-off might well perceive,
 If any man that day were left afield,
 The hard earth shake, and a low thunder of arms.
 And Lancelot bode a little, till he saw

Which were the weaker ; then he hurl'd into it 460
 Against the stronger : little need to speak
 Of Lancelot in his glory ! King, duke, earl,
 Count, baron — whom he smote, he overthrew.

But in the field were Lancelot's kith and kin,
 Ranged with the Table Round that held the lists, 465
 Strong men, and wrathful that a stranger knight
 Should do and almost overdo the deeds
 Of Lancelot ; and one said to the other, " Lo !
 What is he ? I do not mean the force alone — 470
 The grace and versatility of the man !
 Is it not Lancelot ? " " When has Lancelot worn
 Favor of any lady in the lists ?
 Not such his wont, as we that know him know."
 " How then ? who then ? " a fury seized them all, 475
 A fiery family passion for the name
 Of Lancelot, and a glory one with theirs.
 They couch'd their spears and prick'd their steeds, and
 thus,
 Their plumes driven backward by the wind they made
 In moving, all together down upon him
 Bare, as a wild wave in the wide North Sea, 480
 Green-glimmering toward the summit, bears, with all
 Its stormy crests that smoke against the skies,
 Down on a bark, and overbears the bark
 And him that helms it ; so they overbore 485
 Sir Lancelot and his charger, and a spear
 Down-glancing lamed the charger, and a spear
 Prick'd sharply his own cuirass, and the head
 Pierced thro' his side, and there snapt and remain'd.

Then Sir Lavaine did well and worshipfully :
 He bore a knight of old repute to the earth, 490
 And brought his horse to Lancelot where he lay.

He up the side, sweating with agony, got,
 But thought to do while he might yet endure,
 And being lustily holpen by the rest,
 His party, — tho' it seem'd half-miracle 495
 To those he fought with, — drave his kith and kin,
 And all the Table Round that held the lists,
 Back to the barrier; then the trumpets blew
 Proclaiming his the prize who wore the sleeve
 Of scarlet and the pearls; and all the knights, 500
 His party, cried, "Advance and take thy prize,
 The diamond;" but he answer'd: "Diamond me
 No diamonds! for God's love, a little air!
 Prize me no prizes, for my prize is death!
 Hence will I, and I charge you, follow me not." 505

He spoke, and vanish'd suddenly from the field
 With young Lavaine into the poplar grove.
 There from his charger down he slid, and sat,
 Gasping to Sir Lavaine, "Draw the lance-head."
 "Ah, my sweet lord Sir Lancelot," said Lavaine, 510
 "I dread me, if I draw it, you will die."
 But he, "I die already with it: draw —
 Draw," — and Lavaine drew, and Sir Lancelot gave
 A marvellous great shriek and ghastly groan,
 And half his blood burst forth, and down he sank 515
 For the pure pain, and wholly swoon'd away.
 Then came the hermit out and bare him in,
 There stanch'd his wound; and there, in daily doubt
 Whether to live or die, for many a week
 Hid from the wild world's rumor by the grove 520
 Of poplars with their noise of falling showers,
 And ever-tremulous aspen-trees, he lay.

But on that day when Lancelot fled the lists,
 His party, knights of utmost North and West,

Lords of waste marshes, kings of desolate isles, 525
 Came round their great Pendragon, saying to him,
 "Lo, Sire, our knight, thro' whom we won the day,
 Hath gone sore wounded, and hath left his prize
 Untaken, crying that his prize is death."
 "Heaven hinder," said the King, "that such an one, 530
 So great a knight as we have seen to-day —
 He seem'd to me another Lancelot —
 Yea, twenty times I thought him Lancelot —
 He must not pass uncared for. Wherefore rise,
 O Gawain, and ride forth and find the knight. 535
 Wounded and wearied, needs must he be near.
 I charge you that you get at once to horse.
 And, knights and kings, there breathes not one of you
 Will deem this prize of ours is rashly given:
 His prowess was too wondrous. We will do him 540
 No customary honor: since the knight
 Came not to us, of us to claim the prize,
 Ourselves will send it after. Rise and take
 This diamond, and deliver it, and return,
 And bring us where he is, and how he fares, 545
 And cease not from your quest until ye find."

So saying, from the carven flower above,
 To which it made a restless heart, he took
 And gave the diamond: then from where he sat
 At Arthur's right, with smiling face arose, 550
 With smiling face and frowning heart, a prince
 In the mid might and flourish of his May,
 Gawain, surnamed the Courteous, fair and strong,
 And after Lancelot, Tristram, and Geraint,
 And Gareth, a good knight, but therewithal 555
 Sir Modred's brother, and the child of Lot,
 Nor often loyal to his word, and now
 Wroth that the King's command to sally forth

In quest of whom he knew not, made him leave
The banquet and concourse of knights and kings. 560

So all in wrath he got to horse and went;
While Arthur to the banquet, dark in mood,
Past, thinking, "Is it Lancelot who hath come
Despite the wound he spake of, all for gain
Of glory, and hath aduꝛ wound to wound, 565
And ridden away to die? So fear'd the King,
And, after two days' tarriance there, return'd.
Then when he saw the Queen, embracing ask'd,
"Love, are you yet so sick?" "Nay, lord," she said.
"And where is Lancelot?" Then the Queen amazed, 570
"Was he not with you? won he not your prize?"
"Nay, but one like him." "Why, that like was he."
And when the King demanded how she knew,
Said: "Lord, no sooner had ye parted from us
Than Lancelot told me of a common talk 575
That men went down before his spear at a touch,
But knowing he was Lancelot; his great name
Conquer'd; and therefore would he hide his name
From all men, even the King, and to this end
Had made the pretext of a hindering wound, 580
That he might joust unknown of all, and learn
If his old prowess were in aught decay'd;
And added, 'Our true Arthur, when he learns,
Will well allow my pretext, as for gain
Of purer glory.'"

Then replied the King: 585
"Far lovelier in our Lancelot had it been,
In lieu of idly dallying with the truth,
To have trusted me as he hath trusted thee.
Surely his King and most familiar friend
Might well have kept his secret. True, indeed, 590

Albeit I know my knights fantastical,
So fine a fear in our large Lancelot
Must needs have moved my laughter: now remains
But little cause for laughter: his own kin —
Ill news, my Queen, for all who love him, this! — 595
His kith and kin, not knowing, set upon him;
So that he went sore wounded from the field.
Yet good news too; for goodly hopes are mine
That Lancelot is no more a lonely heart.
He wore, against his wont, upon his helm 600
A sleeve of scarlet, broider'd with great pearls,
Some gentle maiden's gift."

"Yea, lord," she said,
"Thy hopes are mine," and saying that, she choked,
And sharply turn'd about to hide her face,
Past to her chamber, and there flung herself 605
Down on the great King's couch, and writhed upon it,
And clench'd her fingers till they bit the palm,
And shriek'd out "Traitor!" to the unhearing wall,
Then flash'd into wild tears, and rose again,
And moved about her palace, proud and pale. 610

Gawain the while thro' all the region round
Rode with his diamond, wearied of the quest,
Touch'd at all points except the poplar grove,
And came at last, tho' late, to Astolat;
Whom glittering in enamell'd arms the maid 615
Glanced at, and cried, "What news from Camelot, lord?
What of the knight with the red sleeve?" "He won."
"I knew it," she said. "But parted from the jousts
Hurt in the side;" whereat she caught her breath;
Thro' her own side she felt the sharp lance go; 620
Thereon she smote her hand; wellnigh she swoon'd:
And, while he gazed wonderingly at her, came

The Lord of Astolat out, to whom the prince
 Reported who he was, and on what quest
 Sent, that he bore the prize and could not find 625
 The victor, but had ridden a random round
 To seek him, and had wearied of the search.
 To whom the Lord of Astolat: "Bide with us,
 And ride no more at random, noble prince!
 Here was the knight, and here he left a shield; 630
 This will he send or come for: furthermore
 Our son is with him; we shall hear anon,
 Needs must we hear." To this the courteous prince
 Accorded with his wonted courtesy,
 Courtesy with a touch of traitor in it, 635
 And staid; and cast his eyes on fair Elaine;
 Where could be found face daintier? then her shape
 From forehead down to foot, perfect — again
 From foot to forehead exquisitely turn'd:
 "Well — if I bide, lo! this wild flower for me!" 640
 And oft they met among the garden yews,
 And there he set himself to play upon her
 With sallying wit, free flashes from a height
 Above her, graces of the court, and songs,
 Sighs, and low smiles, and golden eloquence, 645
 And amorous adulation, till the maid
 Rebell'd against it, saying to him: "Prince,
 O loyal nephew of our noble King,
 Why ask you not to see the shield he left, 649
 Whence you might learn his name? Why slight your King,
 And lose the quest he sent you on, and prove
 No surer than our falcon yesterday,
 Who lost the hern we slipt her at, and went
 To all the winds?" "Nay, by mine head," said he,
 "I lose it, as we lose the lark in heaven, 655
 O damsel, in the light of your blue eyes;
 But an ye will it let me see the shield."

And when the shield was brought, and Gawain saw
 Sir Lancelot's azure lions, crown'd with gold,
 Ramp in the field, he smote his thigh, and mock'd: 660
 "Right was the King! our Lancelot! that true man!"
 "And right was I," she answer'd merrily, "I,
 Who dream'd my knight the greatest knight of all."
 "And if *I* dream'd," said Gawain, "that you love
 This greatest knight, your pardon! lo, ye know it! 665
 Speak, therefore: shall I waste myself in vain?"
 Full simple was her answer: "What know I?
 My brethren have been all my fellowship;
 And I, when often they have talk'd of love,
 Wish'd it had been my mother, for they talk'd, 670
 Meseem'd, of what they knew not; so myself —
 I know not if I know what true love is,
 But if I know, then, if I love not him,
 I know there is none other I can love."
 "Yea, by God's death," said he, "ye love him well, 675
 But would not, knew ye what all others know,
 And whom he loves." "So be it," cried Elaine,
 And lifted her fair face and moved away:
 But he pursued her, calling, "Stay a little!
 One golden minute's grace! he wore your sleeve: 680
 Would he break faith with one I may not name?
 Must our true man change like a leaf at last?
 Nay — like enow: why then, far be it from me
 To cross our mighty Lancelot in his loves!
 And, damsel, for I deem you know full well 685
 Where your great knight is hidden, let me leave
 My quest with you; the diamond also: here!
 For if you love, it will be sweet to give it;
 And if he love, it will be sweet to have it
 From your own hand; and whether he love or not, 690
 A diamond is a diamond. Fare you well
 A thousand times! — a thousand times farewell!